

ARGUMENT

Debating the War on Women

In the May/June issue of Foreign Policy, Mona Eltahawy argues that the real war on women is in the Middle East. FP asked six smart observers to weigh in on Eltahawy's claim that many of the men of the Arab world hate women -- and the controversial cover image that accompanied it.

BY ALLISON GOOD | APRIL 24, 2012, 11:55 PM

Sondos Asem: Misogyny exists, but blaming it for women's suffering is simplistic

Shadi Hamid: Arab women have more agency than you might think

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf: The Prophet Mohammad was a revolutionary feminist

Hanin Ghaddar: We need more badass ladies

Naheed Mustafa: "Nekkid Burqa Woman" is lazy and insulting

Leila Ahmed: Eltahawy misreads Alifa Rifaat

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Sondos Asem:

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indignities and suffering endured by all Egyptians, men and women, from decades of corrupt and oppressive rule. Despite the oppression, I believed in my power to effect change. I believed then and I believe now that to bring about that change, we need lots of determination and hard work.

Although I share many of her concerns, I respectfully disagree with Mona Eltahawy's simplistic assertion that the plight of women in the Arab world is the result of being hated by the rest of society — more specifically, by men, and even more so by newly elected Islamists. In taking issue with Islamists' view of women, Eltahawy uses a combination of hyperbole and perhaps benign neglect to highlight offensive stances and bury more women-centered ones. Far from constituting a solution, this type of one-dimensional reductionism and stereotyping is one of the problems facing Arab women. Let's be clear: There is misogyny in the Arab world. But if we want progress for Arab women, we must hack at the roots of evil, not at its branches.

Indeed, the status of women is a serious challenge in post-revolutionary Egypt. Many Egyptian women suffer from discrimination both in society and in their homes. Some 5 million Egyptian women are the sole breadwinners for their families. Female genital mutilation (FGM) remains a widespread practice in rural areas and Upper Egypt. Sexual harassment abounds on Egyptian streets, and the list goes on. To address these issues, however, we ought to look at the bigger picture: More than 20 percent of young people remain jobless, and almost half of them are women. Illiteracy and poverty — the twin drivers of discrimination — are widespread: 20 percent of Egyptians are illiterate, and more than 40 percent live on less than \$2 per day.

But how do we move forward? Based on these alarming figures, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) has devised a holistic plan to advance women's standing in Egyptian society. First, we acknowledge that

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practices — not just FGM — that must be eradicated outright, but railing against such practices will not make them disappear. Instead, what we need are sustained, nationwide campaigns to raise awareness and dissociate religion from repression of women. We also recognize that, in some cases, we cannot wait for educational efforts to take root. Both the legislative and executive branches of the state must play an immediate role. Legislation criminalizing harassment of and assaults against women must be passed, while ensuring that these measures are implemented by strict rule of law.

As a party that adopts Islam as its reference, we believe that our civil-society outreach can be as effective as legislative and executive avenues. Contrary to the underlying argument in Eltahawy's article, we believe that religion can be the main driver for renouncing violence and the repression of women. Islam empowers women both in their households and in society. Men and women are both entitled to the same level of respect, social status, and protection under the law.

Beyond the political and cultural realms, there is one other important plank in the struggle to advance the status of women. The FJP's platform and our flagship Nahda (Renaissance) Project both encourage and support female entrepreneurship while offering adequate health insurance to female breadwinners. Economic security for women is as essential as political and cultural change. Moreover, we are seeking to change the negative perception of women's political participation by promoting the active participation of women in politics and introducing successful female role models that will help counter stereotypes.

While ensuring that women have a vibrant role in society, the FJP is also concerned with making sure that families are supported and nurtured. However much people wish to be different, women remain the primary

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both at home and at work. FJP will adopt a set of family-centered policies that enable women to support their family lives. We will not shy away from the value we place on family life nor will we accept that women who choose to focus on their families are somehow making an inferior choice.

A democratic Egypt in which the citizenry are informed and in which the rule of law is supreme will ensure the success of these programs and others, leading to the welfare of all society, with women as its backbone. Attributing women's suffering in our region to misogyny and hatred of women is overly simplistic and does nothing to help women in their struggle for dignity and justice.

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Shadi Hamid:

Unquestionably, the plight of Arab women is cause for considerable alarm. And it only seems to have gotten worse since the Arab uprisings began. For this reason, Mona Eltahawy's recent [Foreign Policy](#) [essay](#) makes for vital reading. But how and why did it get this bad? The answers to this question are perhaps just as troubling, and require far greater consideration than Eltahawy allows. In Egypt, women were at the frontlines of revolt. But when it came time to cast their votes, the majority of Egyptian women voted for parties that do not believe in "gender equality" as most Westerners would understand the term. Presumably, men did not force them to do so. The fact of the matter is that Arab women, throughout the region, *are* exercising their moral and political agency, but not necessarily in the ways we might expect.

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when women were eventually granted suffrage, Islamist parties did just as well, if not better, in subsequent elections. In other words, women, in large numbers, were exercising their right to vote for candidates who did not believe they had the right to vote in the first place. Meanwhile, in an April 2011 [poll](#), only 18 percent of Egyptian respondents said they would "support a woman president." Breaking it down by gender, female respondents were more open to the idea than men were. But the vast majority — 73 percent — still said they would *not* support a female presidential candidate.

The reality is that democracy and liberalism do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, at least not in the Arab world. If anything, the opposite is true. Democracy means that governments need to be responsive to the will of the people. But the will of Arab men, and even Arab women, does not seem to be particularly supportive of the Western conception of gender equality.

Which brings us to an uncomfortable question: What if Arabs decide they want to be illiberal? The Arab Spring provided an opportunity for the United States to align itself with the universal values that so many Arabs hold dear — the right to be free, to vote, to peacefully protest, to express their opinions without fear of persecution. But some seemingly universal values — regarding not just gender but a number of other issues — are not universally held. It is a slippery slope. The controversial Indian feminist Gayatri Spivak took this sort of cultural relativism to its logical but troubling conclusion when she argued that British attempts to abolish *suttee* — a tradition in which a woman burns herself to death after her husband dies — denied Indian women their own agency.

In feminist studies, including the work of [Alison Assiter](#) and [Judith Butler](#), there has been a long-running debate between those who prioritize "empowerment" and those who privilege "equality." It soon became clear —

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the latter. But where does that leave the rest of us? What the international community can and should do is promote programs and initiatives that empower women's participation in political life while realizing that, once empowered, Arab women may make decisions that we find bizarre or objectionable.

There are no shortcuts. The most direct interventions are gender quotas in parliament and other elected bodies. Before the Arab Spring, I was generally against quotas because autocratic regimes used them for reasons that had much more to do with holding power than helping women. Now that new democracies are (hopefully) emerging in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, there is a chance to start anew. Tunisia's quota system — requiring that parties include equal number of men and women on their lists — is a model worth studying. But some caution is in order. As James Liddell, the author of a study of gender quotas in Morocco, notes, "One of the most problematic assumptions behind quotas is that having more women in parliament somehow represents a *de facto* gain for women's causes."

Indeed, in Tunisia, nearly 86 percent of the women elected under the new quota — 42 out of 49 parliamentarians — were from the Islamist party al-Nahda. As it turns out, quota systems generally benefit the largest, best organized parties, which in the Arab world are invariably Islamist. (This is because smaller, liberal parties can often only win one seat in a given district, and even liberal parties will almost always put a man at the top of the list.)

In Tunisia's case, the gap between al-Nahda's overall share of seats in parliament (only 41.5 percent) and its share of women's seats was a remarkable 44 percent. If Egypt applied the Tunisian model, Islamist women — represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and the ultraconservative al-

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Quotas, then, are a mixed bag. If the goal is empowerment, then quotas do exactly what they're supposed to do: empower (some) women to play political roles that society wouldn't otherwise allow them to play. But if the goal is promoting a particular, "liberal" conception of women's role in society, then quotas are insufficient to the task.

Quotas, like any top-down solution, fail to address the root of the problem — that the prevailing culture in the Arab world, for now at least, does not view women the same way that Western cultures do. In other words, getting to gender equality is probably going to take a very long time. The other possibility, and the more likely one, is that Arab societies will decide to go their own way — a different way — on women's rights. And they may do so both democratically and with the support and active encouragement of Arab women themselves.

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Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf:

As Islam has spread throughout the world, it has combined religion with native cultural practices. Many centuries later, separating the religion from the underlying culture has become difficult. That's why Islam as practiced in Egypt differs from, say, Islam as practiced in Malaysia.

Mona Eltahawy describes cultural practices in Egypt and the Middle East that predate Islam yet have been embraced by many people now as part of Islam. The practice of genital mutilation of women, for example, is found only in Africa. If it were part of Islam, it would be practiced by Muslims all over the world.

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him, Arab women had no rights; they were men's property. Before Islam, men could have as many wives as they wanted. While it might sound outrageous to Americans today, the Quran insisted that men could have no more than four wives and that the wives must be treated equally — a radical idea at the time. In another major breakthrough, the Quran decreed that female children must be given a share of their parents' inheritance. In fact, with the explosion of wealth in some of the Gulf states, women are now accumulating economic power through inheritance.

None of this may sound too liberal to many Muslim women, especially in the United States. Women are still assigned second-class status in much of Africa and the Middle East. But the question modern Muslim scholars are asking is this: Was it God's intent to set gender relations as they were in the seventh century for all time? Or does the Quran's directive reveal a divine intent that striving for gender parity and justice should be perfected in our time? If it is the former — as many Muslims insist — then seventh-century practices become the norm. If it is the latter, as I and many believe, then we have an obligation in the 21st century to continue the quest for equality and justice that the Prophet began.

Here is where American Muslims become so important. As it has in other countries, Islam as practiced in the United States is taking on many of the cultural norms of American society. American Muslim women drive cars. No one advocates genital mutilation here. Muslim women enjoy the rights and privileges of all American women.

These new practices are transforming Islam here and, as with so many other immigrant groups, American Muslims are positively influencing events back in their native countries. Whether she knows it or not, that's the most important thing that Mona Eltahawy is doing with this essay.

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Moving The Mountain, *which goes on sale May 8.*

Hanin Ghaddar:

I was 16 when I first recognized that my father was terrified of me. We were at a grocery shop in my town in southern Lebanon when my classmate, a boy, came in. All I did was say "hi" and smile, but that was horrifying enough for my father to spend the night screaming and banging his head against the walls because he did not want to hit me. His little girl had turned into a woman with a natural sex drive that he could not put off.

I was a woman, one who could cause him shame and dishonor by talking to men in a public space. His reaction triggered a tornado of mixed thoughts and feelings in my mind. But in the midst of the confusion and deep fear, I sensed a strange quiver of power.

In the years that followed, I used this power against him and everything patriarchal in my community. I gradually raised his expectations and, with them, his fears. His alarm about me and my body made him more repressive, but it was his fear that exposed his weakness and made me realize that I could break him.

That's how I started to appreciate badass ladies — ladies who are brave enough to break the chains off their bodies and sexuality, and stress their dignity, not their shame. These ladies, who are not afraid to confront men in the public sphere and turn their bodies from symbols of shame into icons of dignity and self-worth, are much needed now; otherwise, the Arab Spring will not be complete and women will remain, as Mona Eltahawy puts it, the most vulnerable in Egypt, and the region.

When Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi removed her face veil in 1923, she

did it as soon as she stepped out of the train station in Cairo after returning.
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marked the entry of Egyptian women into Egypt's public life. The act was shocking at the time, but the shock made change possible.

Mona Eltahawy is right. They hate us. But they also fear us, as much as our dictators feared us. And we can break them, as much as we broke and will keep on breaking our tyrants. Today, their fear of the public sphere is multiplied because of the revolutions. We should use that fear to our advantage.

Syrian forces are raping women in Syria to stain the Syrians' present and future with shame and dishonor. That's their way of stating their fear of the people in the streets. But the promise lies in the contradiction. We have to constantly offend the status quo and provoke with whatever tools we possess. That's the way to shake off their fear of our bodies and defy the triangle that has dominated women for centuries: the state, religious institutions, and the man of the house.

Ninety years after Shaarawi took her veil off in public, Aliaa Elmahdy of Egypt and Maryam Namazie of Iran decided to unleash their own form of social protest in defense of women's rights. Elmahdy posted a nude self-portrait on the Internet and Namazie created an entire calendar of fully naked women. Namazie described her calendar as a "scream against misogyny," but was surprised that many who opposed the calendar were women's rights campaigners who argued that she and Elmahdy had tarnished the revolutions with their actions.

The message has been missed — and that's probably our main challenge. Women still do not appreciate the power they hold, and are incapable of using it to break male-dominated society. Women still think of themselves as helpless creatures who need constant protection from men. To grasp our strength, we must accent that freedom involves freedom of expression.

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right to choose and use our sexuality.

We need more badass ladies.

Hanin Ghaddar is the managing editor of NOW Lebanon and a journalist based in Beirut.

Naheed Mustafa:

Let me just state right off the top: I have nothing against naked women. But as with all things, there's a time and place. When they appear out of context, naked women quickly become nekkid chicks. Now, granted, I'm hard pressed to point out exactly when — outside of three or four very specific scenarios — it's appropriate to plunk down a picture of a naked woman. But I'm certain it's not smack in the middle of a serious essay about gender-based violence in the Arab world.

Here's a quick reenactment of me reading Mona Eltahawy's cover essay as my eyes involuntarily (I swear!) flit over to Nekkid Burqa Woman: "So, yes, women all over the world have problems — BOOBS! — yes, the United States has yet to elect a female president — BOOOBS! — and yes, women continue to be objectified in many "Western" countries — BOOOOOBS!" And so on.

When I was asked to contribute this critique, I had to ask myself what exactly my problem was. I've narrowed it down to two things: The image of Nekkid Burqa Woman is lazy and insulting.

Let's talk lazy first. And by lazy I mean editorially. Illustrations for print stories are meant to illuminate the text, to present a further dimension to the written word. They are not incidental to the item. The image of a naked woman with a painted-on burqa does nothing to illuminate the essay it accompanies. It's trite and boring — been there, done that.

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Nekkid Burqa Woman is, in fact, so common that she doesn't even shock or provoke anymore. Her image simply elicits, in the language of the Internet, a "Really, **Foreign Policy**? Really?" The covered-yet-naked-yet-covered Unknown Brown Woman is all over the place. You can find her on book covers and in movie trailers. You'll see her used in making the case for war and you'll see her used in making the case for jihad.

The image, in fact, works against the essay. It belies the nuance and the breadth of the writing by reducing the subject to one easily consumable image — an image that doesn't even speak to the kind of women Eltahawy is writing about.

If anything, the image does exactly what Eltahawy accuses Islamists of doing: reducing women to one-dimensional caricatures with little or no autonomy.

Given the kind of riveting photos that emerged from the Arab Spring — images of women in hijab and not, old and young, protesting, fighting, and dying to assert their agency — I find it difficult to believe the magazine went with its best option.

I also thought the image was insulting — to Muslim women specifically but also to women in general.

Muslim women are typically presented in two ways in the West: traditional/veiled/subservient or modern/unveiled/autonomous. In the Muslim world, it's the reverse. The best, most free woman is the most covered. Uncovering is for a woman without morals, one who is oppressed by her own desires.

In both views, Muslim women are defined by how they (un)dress. Eltahawy's essay is at its core about Arab women — Muslim and not — fighting for their

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Yemen, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Libya. They are religious and secular, rural and urban, educated and illiterate. They are married and single, young and old. But these various identities — some overlapping and some in opposition — are reduced to the one most facile image that we in the West have become used to. It mocks the complexity of Muslim women.

The further insult stems from the fact the woman in the picture is inactive. She is simply presented for consumption. She is whatever you want her to be. Eltahawy's essay — whether you agree with it or not — is a voice of directed rage. She is enraged not just by what she's seeing but by what she, herself, has experienced at the hands — literally — of the Egyptian state.

She is not silent. The women she writes about are not silent. But she, and they, are represented by the image of a woman with nothing to say.

And it's not just about Muslim women. The illustration is insulting to women in general. It takes the profound problem of gender-based violence and reduces it to sexual imagery: "Hey, we might be talking about the endemic hatred of one gender for the other but here's a naked painted lady to keep you company!"

Eltahawy had plenty to say in her essay. The anger is unmistakable. She doesn't mince words about the insults and abuses and violence women face on a daily basis. It would've been nice if the illustrations for her essay weren't just one more kick to the head.

Naheed Mustafa is a freelance writer and broadcaster based in Toronto, Canada.

Leila Ahmed:

Alifa Rifaat, whose writing frames Mona Eltahawy's essay, was a wonderful

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Her stories are typically brief, powerful meditations on themes of human desires and failures, and people's anguished loneliness in the midst, supposedly, of intimacy — between husband and wife, mother and daughter, even mistress and maid. Publishing her work mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, Rifaat was probably the first Egyptian woman author to write fairly directly about women's sexuality. She penned, among other things, a story in which a woman whose husband figures only marginally in the story experiences ecstatic sexual fulfillment with a jinn who comes to her in the form of a woman.

Rifaat was herself forbidden to write by her husband, a policeman, for a good many years. She was thus intimately familiar with male chauvinism, as her stories, written mostly from the perspective of a female character, make clear. But she was also capable of writing very empathetically of men's travails, loneliness, and failed hopes.

Disconcertingly, Eltahawy strangely misreads (in my view) the Rifaat story with which she begins her essay. After enduring "unmoved," as Eltahawy correctly says, her husband's sexual exertions, the story's central character then eagerly rises to wash herself and perform ritual prayers. Eltahawy reads these actions as indicating Rifaat's "brilliant" portrayal of "sublimation through religion."

Rifaat, when I met her in Cairo in the early 1990s, wore the *hijab*, the Muslim head scarf. And she explicitly spoke to me — in the course of a long, rambling conversation in which she also talked of the tremendous importance to her of sexuality — of how much joy she found in prayer, and of how she (like the character in her story) almost lived for those moments of prayer.

Given this memory, and in light too of the sheer imaginative depth of Rifaat's fictional explorations of human consciousness. I find it entirely

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Eltahawy's own sweepingly dismissive views of prayer and religion.

These were just some of the concerns I had as I read just Eltahawy's opening lines. And I found almost every paragraph of Eltahawy's essay similarly troubling as, again and again, broad brushstrokes and sweeping generalizations erased subtle nuances and garbled and swept aside important differences.

It is certainly Eltahawy's right and indeed even her obligation, as a feminist and a noted journalist with rare and impressive access to American media, to grapple with understanding and narrating the story of women in the Middle East and what she perceives to be the "war" on women in the ways that make most sense to her. And certainly I have no quarrel whatsoever with the will and desire she gives voice to — of wanting to improve the condition of women in the Middle East and bring to an end the wars and other injustices to which they are subjected.

There are, of course, many ways of pursuing feminist goals. Just the other day, I heard a talk given at the Radcliffe Institute by Nadjie al-Ali, a professor at the University of London, on the devastating costs for women and children — in terms of the sheer numbers of lives lost, and the destruction, mutilation, dismemberment, and displacements suffered — of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For Eltahawy, who makes no mention in her essay of those wars (or of the deadly struggles in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, or Yemen), the "real" war on women in the Middle East, as she declares in her title, and the one that she most urgently wishes to bring to our attention, is the war being conducted by Islamic patriarchy and misogyny. Ali, on the other hand, who, like Eltahawy, is a staunchly secular feminist, is passionately concerned above all about placing the social costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan at the very forefront of our consciousness here in the United States.

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debated the key sources of women's oppression. Is it patriarchy, religion, racism, imperialism, or class oppression, or some very lethal and toxic mix of all of these? Feminists have also thus differed on the solutions, as well as exactly whom we must fight first to liberate women. Eltahawy is evidently fiercely committed to the belief that it is religion above all — and actually specifically and apparently exclusively Islam — that constitutes the dangerously deadly heart of women's oppression in the Middle East. And it is of course absolutely her right to believe this.

But again, feminism can take many and even quite unexpected forms. As the early days of the Arab uprisings unfolded on our television screens, many of us saw for ourselves the tens of thousands of women who were out in the streets in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, taking a stand alongside men for human rights and human dignity. A fair proportion of these women wore hijab — a sign, usually, of a religious commitment to Islam. Presumably, these women would not share Eltahawy's fiercely contemptuous understanding of Islam as the source of all their troubles and problems. Some of these women in hijab proved to be important actors in the Arab uprisings. The young Egyptian activist Asma Mahfouz, for example, posted a video of herself on Facebook delivering an eloquent, impassioned speech calling on people to join her in Tahrir Square to take their stand alongside her for human rights and dignity. Her video went viral and is credited with having played a key role in initiating the movement to occupy Tahrir Square. Similarly Tawakkol Karman, the Yemeni woman who won the Nobel Prize for her committed activism in the uprising, is a tremendously courageous, articulate, and outspoken woman. It would be wonderful to hear what such women think of what is happening in their countries and what they think and hope for in relation to women's rights.

And so let me close by, first of all, thanking **Foreign Policy** for inviting me to

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them to also reach out to women such as Mahfouz and Karman to invite them to share their views with us.

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TAGS: ECONOMICS, EGYPT, HUMAN RIGHTS, LAW, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, POLITICS, WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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